

When the child woke that Sunday morning, the thing was simply there, beside the window, as if it had always been. It had arrived during the night without sound, without fanfare. It had crept quietly between the rocking horse with its red saddle that Granddad had carved from hickory, and yesterday's clothes, discarded in a pile, the wet clay from the wooded hills outside the house now caked hard along the seams.

It slithered, jagged and full of threat, past the small shelf unit with the rows of books and the snowdome of a mountain, past the cuckoo clock Aunt Nelly brought back from Austria.

The child blinked hard.

Perhaps it was just a shadow, thrown by the flat morning light seeping under the drawn bedroom curtains?

A piece of jumper or a trouser leg, twisted freakishly?

Two blinks, three blinks – and open . . .

No. It was real. Bigger than last time. Angrier, even, with a gaping mouth. A slice of light across the eiderdown from a gap in the curtains pointed straight at it like a dagger. The air in the bedroom felt chill.

Gripping the eiderdown, the child looked around. The clock said 6.34 a.m. Nobody would be up yet. There was time, at least, to think.

The child emerged slowly from the warm sheets, slipped onto the ground and stayed low, as if the thing were about to attack.

*It seemed to grow as the child edged nearer. Until it was right there, face to face, spitting out its cool poison.*

*The child inhaled heavily. It was so much bigger than last time. Its jaws gaped, revealing a tiny white spot within its depths. Where the poison came from.*

*That was new. The tiny white spot.*

*Without planning to, the child simply didn't exhale again. It seemed to help for a moment, to hold the breath inside, as if controlling time. If there was no breath, no seconds counted away, time would stop, wouldn't it?*

*Nothing would happen.*

*Mother would not see it.*

*The clock ticked into the silence of the room. Out here on the hill, a mile from the nearest road, there was nothing else to hear.*

*Ten, eleven, twelve, thirt—*

*It was no use. The child's lungs protested.*

*Releasing the breath in a panic, the child ran to the half-open bedroom door and peeked one eye around the door frame.*

*The hall was still. The light along it receded until the kitchen door at the far end was just a blurred shadow. Three doors down, Mother's door was firmly shut. A gentle snoring from the small room next door to it confirmed Father was not in there with her.*

*The child desperately looked ahead out of the feature window that ran the breadth of the long, one-storey chalet. Father had said the window was there because people thought the view of the peaks beyond was pretty. That people would envy their family this incredible position.*

*They didn't have to live here.*

*The urge to run out of the front door to hide in the woods was tempered only by the fear of the woods themselves. The dark hollows and weaves of branches that liked to suck you in and spin you around until you didn't know where you were any more.*

*Moving back into the bedroom, the child shut the door gently.*

*There had to be something. Anything.*

*On the floor lay yesterday's dressing gown.*

*On an impulse, the child bent down and flung it, as if it were burning hot, over the rocking horse. By tweaking the corners, you could cover most of it. You could trap its chilly poison behind a curtain of flannel.*

*What choice was there?*

*Otherwise, today would be like yesterday, but much worse.*



## CHAPTER ONE

It was one of those days when you didn't know what was going on. Just that something unexpected had happened. You could tell by the maverick puff of dark grey smoke that hung above the M40 motorway, the kaleidoscope jam of cars glinting under an otherwise blue sky, by the way that the adults craned their necks out of windows to see what was up ahead.

Jack kicked his football boots together in the back seat, feeling carsick.

'Where are we?'

'Nearly there. Oh, will you get out of the bloody way! What is wrong with these . . .?'

He glanced up to see his mother glaring in the rear-view mirror. Behind them in the slow lane, a lorry juttied up the back of their car, its engine growling.

'Him?'

Kate shook her head crossly. 'He's right up my back,' she spat, clicking on her indicator and looking for an empty space in the adjacent lane.

Jack rubbed his face, which was still rubbery and red from running around the football field. The warm May afternoon air that blew in through the window was mucky with exhaust fumes

as three thick rows of traffic tried in vain to force their way slowly towards Oxford.

‘I can’t even see his lights now . . .’

A spasm gripped Jack’s stomach. It made the nausea worse. He turned his eyes back to his computer game. ‘Mum, chill out. They probably have sensors or something to tell them when they’re going to hit something.’

‘Do they?’ She waved to a tiny hatchback in the middle lane that was flashing her to move in. ‘What, even the older ones?’

‘Hmm?’ he replied, pressing a button.

‘Jack? Even old lorries, like that?’

He shrugged. ‘I don’t know. I mean, they don’t *want* to hit you, Mum. They don’t *want* to go to jail.’

Without looking up, he knew she was shaking her head again.

‘Yeah, well, it’s the one who’s *not* thinking that you’ve got to worry about, Jack. Last year, a British couple got killed by a French lorry doing the same thing – he was texting someone in a traffic jam and ran right over them. He didn’t even know he’d done it, they were so squashed.’

‘You told me,’ Jack muttered. He flicked the little man back and forwards, trying to get to the next level, trying to take his mind off his stomach.

‘Oh God – I’m going to be late,’ his mother said, looking at the car clock.

‘What for?’

She hesitated. ‘Just this thing at six.’

‘What, the doctor’s?’

‘No. A work thing.’

He glanced at her in the mirror. Her voice did that thing again, like when she told him the reason she went to London last week on the train. It went flat and calm, as if she were forcing it to stay

still. There were no ups and downs in it. And her eyes slid a tiny bit off to the side, as if she were looking at him but not.

A flicker of white caught Jack's attention in the side mirror. The offending lorry was indicating to move in behind their car again.

He watched his mother, waiting for her to see it. His stomach cramped even worse.

Perhaps it was the cramp that pushed the words out of his mouth.

'Mum . . .'

'What?'

He saw her note the lorry's flashing indicator in the mirror, and her mouth dropped open angrily.

'Oh Jesus – not again . . . What the . . .?'

Jack banged his football boots together again. Dried mud sprinkled onto the newspaper she'd put down in the back.

'Mum?'

'WHAT?'

When his voice came out it was so quiet, he could barely hear it himself over all the straining car engines.

'I could have come back in the minibus. You could have picked me up at school like everyone else.'

He saw her shoulders jar.

'It's fine. I wanted to see you play; it's the tournament final!' she said, the shrillness entering her voice again. 'What, am I an embarrassing mum?'

'I didn't say that,' he said into his computer game.

'Maybe next time I'll come wearing my pants on my head.'

She made a silly face at him in the mirror. He smiled, even though he knew that the silly face wasn't hers. It was stolen property. He'd seen her studying Gabe's mum when she did it. Gabe's mum did it a lot, and it made them laugh. When Jack's

mum did it, it was as if the corners of her lips were pulled up by clothes pegs. Then, two minutes later, they'd slip out of the clothes pegs, back to their normal position, where half of her bottom lip was permanently tucked under the top one, kept firmly in place by her teeth; her face set in a grimace that suggested she was concentrating hard on something private.

'It was nice to see Gabe today,' she said. 'Why don't you ask him round soon?'

Jack kept his eyes on his game. After what she'd done to their house this week, he'd never be able to ask anyone around again.

'Maybe.'

'Oh . . . there it is . . . Can you see?'

He leaned over and looked out of the passenger side of the car. There was a flashing blue light around the bend to the left.

'Police,' he said, straining forward. 'And . . . a fire engine.'

'Really?'

Her voice sounded like splintering glass. He sighed quietly and put down his game.

'Oh, Mum . . . I've got something really good to tell you.'

'Uhuh?'

'Next term, Mr Dixon wants me to play reserve for this junior team he runs after school.'

'Does he?' She glanced at him. 'That's brilliant, Jack . . .'

'But I'll have to train on Wednesdays after school, as well, so perhaps I can go to . . .'

In the mirror, he saw her eyes dart wildly back and forward between the blue light and the lorry now crossing lanes to sit behind them again.

His stomach was starting to feel as if it were strung tightly across the middle, like when he tuned the electric guitar Aunt Sass had bought him for Christmas too high to see what would happen.

‘MUM?’

Her eyes darted to him, bewildered.

‘WHAT?’

‘Why don’t you move into the fast lane? Lorries aren’t allowed in there.’

And she’d be further away from the burned-out car that was currently coming into view around the bend on the hard shoulder.

His mother stared at him for a second. Finally, she focused back. Then the clothes-peg smile returned.

‘Good idea, Captain,’ she said brightly. ‘But we’re fine here. Don’t worry about it, Jack.’

He saw her force her eyes to crinkle at the sides, just like Gabe’s mum’s did. Except Gabe’s mum’s eyes were warm and blue, set in furrows of laughter lines and friendly freckles. Jack’s mum’s eyes were still, like amber-coloured glass; they sat in skin as white and smooth as Nana’s china, smudged underneath by dark shadows.

He knew his mum’s extra-crinkly smile was supposed to reassure him that there was nothing to worry about. He was only ten and three-quarter years old, it said. She was the grown-up. She was in charge, and everything was fine.

Jack rubbed his stomach, and watched the lorry in the side mirror.

Oh God. She was so late. She couldn’t miss this appointment. The motorway traffic had concertinaed onto the A40 and now into the city and jammed that up too.

Kate turned off the packed main road and sped through the back streets of east Oxford, taking routes the tourists wouldn’t know. Bouncing over speed bumps, she dodged around shoals of cyclists and badly parked rental vans evacuating ramshackle

student houses for the summer. Where there was only room for one vehicle down streets so narrow that cars had parked on the pavement, she forced her way through, waving with a smile at on-coming queues of drivers, ignoring their mouthed insults.

‘They’re here!’ Jack shouted, as she made the last turn into the welcoming width of Hubert Street.

Damn. He was right.

Richard’s black 4x4 was parked in its usual gentlemanly way outside her house, leaving the gravelled driveway free for her. A box of pink tissues on the dashboard announced Helen’s presence. Of course they were here. They would have been here on the dot of five. Desperate to get their hands on him.

‘So they are,’ she said, turning into the drive and braking abruptly in front of the side gate. She pulled on the handbrake harder than she meant to. ‘Right – run. I’m late.’

They spilled out of the car, hands full of plastic bags of Jack’s school clothes, the empty wrappers of post-football snacks and his homework folder for the weekend.

‘Hi!’ Jack called out, waving. Helen was mouthing ‘Hello’ from between Kate’s sitting room curtains, her indented two front teeth giving her a strangely girlish smile for a woman in her sixties.

Kate growled inwardly. Why hadn’t they waited in their car? That house key was for when they were looking after Jack. Not for letting themselves in when she was late. Mentally, she tried to visualize what the house had looked like when she left this morning. What state was the bathroom in? Had she tidied away her bras off the radiators?

Then she remembered what was upstairs.

Oh no.

She slammed the car door and locked it. She was supposed to tell them, before they saw it. Explain.

Keeping her head down, Kate marched after Jack to the front porch.

'Hello! Have you grown again, young man?' Helen called, flinging open the door.

'Not since last week, I don't think, Helen,' Kate said. Why did she do that? They all knew he was small. Pretending he wasn't, was not doing Jack any favours.

'Gosh, you're going to be tall like your dad.' Helen laughed, ignoring her. She placed her arm round Jack, and led him along the hall to the kitchen.

'Everything OK, Kate?' she called back. 'Traffic?'

'Yup. Sorry.'

Kate couldn't help it. She gritted her teeth, as she turned to close the door behind her.

'Let me take those.'

Rapidly, she ungritted them, and turned to see Richard striding towards her, his hands outstretched, without any apparent awkwardness at having let himself into his daughter-in-law's house. His imposing frame filled the hallway. 'How did you get on? Traffic?'

'Hmm, sorry,' she said, giving him Jack's homework. Richard's usual fragrance of pipe smoke and TCP drifted over to her.

They stood for a second, fumbling their fingers between the plastic bag handover. Kate looked up at Richard's brown eyes, waiting for them to check that Jack was out of earshot, then glance up to the upstairs landing above them, then firmly fix back down on her face, serious and questioning. But they didn't. Instead, he turned on his heels and bounced after Helen and Jack to the kitchen at the back of the house, grinning through his grey-flecked beard at the sight of his grandson.

'So did you beat their socks off, sir?' he boomed at Jack, who was stuffing a muffin in his mouth.

Kate glanced upstairs.

It was still there.

Richard just hadn't seen it. This was interesting.

She checked her watch. Five-twenty. The woman wanted to see her at six sharp in north Oxford. The traffic was so bad she was going to have to cycle. Concentrating, Kate worked out a few figures. Thirty-four . . . Eighty-one – or was it eighty-two? Damn it, she needed that new laptop. It was high, anyway.

She shook her head. It would have to be OK.

She followed Richard through to the kitchen, opened a cupboard and bent down to find her helmet.

'Helen, do you mind if I rush off?'

'Of course not, dear,' Helen replied, filling up a jug at the sink. 'Something interesting?'

'Um . . . just a woman who might have some renovation work,' Kate said, avoiding Helen's eyes.

'Where?'

'In Summertown.'

'Oh well, good luck, dear.'

'Thanks.'

Kate turned to see Jack, his mouth still too full of muffin to answer his grandfather's question about the match score in this afternoon's tournament final. He was grinning and sticking up two fingers like Winston Churchill.

'Peace, man?' roared Richard. 'It's the 1960s, is it? No! Two all, then? No? What? A bunny rabbit jumped on to the pitch?' Richard chortled, his arms wrapped round his rugby player's chest, as his grandson shook his head at his jokes. 'What? Two-nil, then?'

Jack nodded, laughing, dropping crumbs out of his mouth.

'Aw – well done!' Helen clapped, cheeks as pink as fairycakes.

'Good lad!' Richard exclaimed. 'Was he good, Mum?'

Kate grabbed her helmet from the back of the cupboard and went to stand up. 'He was. He made a good save, didn't you?'

As she turned round, the sight of Helen and Jack together took her by surprise.

A pit of disappointment opened up in her stomach.

Jack was a clone of her. You couldn't deny it.

Kate buckled up her helmet, watching them. It simply wasn't happening. However desperately she willed her son's hair to darken and coarsen like Hugo's, or his green eyes to turn brown, it was Helen and Saskia whom Jack took after. As he sat, arms touching with his grandmother, the similarities were painfully obvious. The same pale hair that was slightly too fine for the long skater-boy cut he desperately wanted; delicate features that would remain immune to the nasal bumps and widening jaws that would wipe out his friends' childhood beauty; the flawless skin that tanned so easily and would remain unmarked by Kate's dark moles or Richard and Hugo's unruly eyebrows.

No, he was nearly eleven. Nothing was going to change now. Jack would be a physically uncomplicated adult, like his grandmother and aunt, with none of the familiar landmarks of his father.

Kate stood up straight and tried to think about something else. She walked to the fridge and opened it.

'Oh, by the way, Helen, I've made this for tonight,' she said, pulling out a casserole dish and lifting the lid. 'It's just vegetables and lentils. And some potatoes . . .'

Kate stopped.

She stared at the dark brown glutinous sludge of the stew. It was an inch or two shallower in the dish than she'd left it this morning.

'Jack, did you eat some of this?' Kate asked, turning around alarmed. He shook his head.

Kate's eyes flew to the kitchen window locks and the back door. All intact. She then spun round to check the window at the side return – and came face to face with Helen, who had come up behind her.

Watching her.

Helen gave Kate a smile and took the casserole gently from her, replacing it in the fridge.

'Now, don't worry about us, Kate. We stopped at Marks on the way over. I got some salmon and new potatoes, and a bit of salad.'

Kate noted the salmon sitting in her fridge on the shelf above the casserole and felt the waves of Helen's firm resolve radiate towards her. 'Oh. But I made it for tonight. Really. There's plenty for the three of you. I'm just confused at how so much of it has disappeared. It's as if . . .'

'Oh, it'll have just sunk down in the dish when it was cooling,' Helen interrupted, shooting a reassuring smile at Jack. 'No, Kate. You keep it for tomorrow.'

Kate peered into the fridge. Was Helen right? She lifted the lid again to check if she could see a faint line of dried casserole that would prove its original height.

There was nothing there.

'Absolutely,' Richard boomed. 'Take the weight off.'

Richard and Helen together. Two against one, as always.

'OK,' she heard herself say lamely. She replaced the lid and shut the fridge. They could eat their bloody salmon. Jack didn't even like it. He only ate it to be polite.

'Now, you're probably starving, darling, aren't you?' Helen said to Jack, taking Kate's apron off a hook and putting it on. There was a fragment of tinned tomato on it left over from making the stew this morning. It was about to press against Helen's white summer cardigan.

Kate went to speak, and then didn't.

'OK, then . . .' She hesitated. 'By the way . . .'

They both glanced up.

Jack looked down at the table.

'I've . . . have you been up . . .?' She pointed at the ceiling.

They shook their heads.

'No, dear,' Helen replied. 'Why?'

Jack kept his eyes on the table, slowly finishing his muffin.

'Well, I haven't got time to explain, but anyway, don't worry about it. It's just . . .'

They waited, expectantly. Jack's jaws stopped moving.

'I needed to do it. And it's done now. So – see you later.'

And with that, she marched out of the door of her house – *her* house – cross that she had to explain at all.